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IN MEMORIAM DAVID SWING

BORN AUGUST 23, 1830 DIED OCTOBER 3, 1894

CHICAGO LITERARY CLUB
1894



THIS MEMORIAL of our late fellowmember, DAVID SWING, was read at the meeting of the Chicago Literary Club on Monday evening, October 29, 1894, and ordered printed and copies sent to the members of the Club.

Frederick W. Gookin,

Recording Secretary.

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DAVID SWING.

CIXTY-FOUR years ago, in the city of Cincinnati, David Swing was born. father died soon after, and when David was five years old, his mother having married again, the family settled on a farm near Williamsburg, on the Ohio river. Until he was eighteen years of age he lived upon the farm and did the ordinary work of a farmer's boy, attending the village school and academy during the winter months. In the academy Greek and Latin were taught, and when he was eighteen years old, by his work at the academy and at home, he was fitted for college and entered the Miami University at Oxford, Ohio, from which he was graduated in 1852. In most departments of college work he was a student of simply average ability, but was at the very front in literary work and the classical languages. After his graduation he studied law for a year in the office of an uncle in Cincinnati, but, becoming satisfied that the work of a clergyman was his proper vocation, he exchanged the study of law for that of theology, and in due time was graduated from the Lane Theological Seminary. He then returned to Oxford, and for the next twelve years taught the Greek and Latin languages, and preached every second Sunday in a small country church near Oxford, and frequently in the village churches. In this early day his sermons had many of the characteristics of the work of his maturer years—the breadth of view, the profound scholarship, the exquisite mastery of language, the literary touch, the dainty wit and sarcasm and the sovereign poetic fancy which irradiated all. Four years before he came to Chicago he received and accepted a call to a Chicago church, but two or three weeks later he withdrew his acceptance, stating that he felt himself unqualified to permanently interest a city audience. He received three or four subsequent calls to Chicago, which were declined from the same distrust in his own abilities, but in 1866 came his final acceptance from the insistence of some of his

early friends, who more correctly gauged his powers. His first church was presently consolidated with another, forming the Fourth Presbyterian, for which he preached with constantly growing success until 1875. Meantime the church had been burned in the great fire, and until it was rebuilt services were held in Standard Hall and McVicker's Theatre. Charges of heresy were preferred against him, upon which he was tried and acquitted by the local Presbytery, but when an appeal was taken to the General Assembly, he severed his connection with the denomination rather than to be embroiled in a controversy, which to him seemed infinitely distasteful and profitless. Central Music Hall was built by those sympathizing with his views, and from its platform he preached to great and appreciative audiences until the end of his labors.

Such, in brief, is the outline of the life and work of the man who is to-day so widely and profoundly mourned. From boyhood he seemed to have a special facility in the acquisition of languages, and mastered the Italian tongue for the purpose of reading the poems of Dante. His knowledge of the classical languages was phenomenal; his study and teaching of these languages made them seemingly as familiar to him as his mother tongue. His library contained the works of nearly all the Greek and Latin authors, and he usually read several pages daily in each of these languages. This familiarity with the classical authors gave him an inexhaustible fund of anecdote and illustration for the work of his life.

His first national recognition came with his trial for heresy. As we look at this incident after a lapse of twenty years, when the smoke of conflict is cleared away, we can see clearly and without prejudice the merits of the issue between Professor Swing and his principal prosecutor. The Church had a confession of faith, formulated more than two hundred years before, which was supposed at its date to embody the teachings of the New Testament, points, however, which many of the Church members had come to question or quietly to ignore.

Professor Swing formulated his dissent from these certain points upon the ground

that they did not truly represent the teachings of Christ. Dr. Patton's position, in substance, was, that the Presbyterian Church was organized upon this confession of faith; that the question was not whether Professor Swing was right or wrong in his interpretation of the New Testament teachings, but whether he could remain the pastor of a church founded upon formulæ which he in part disbelieved. From a purely technical standpoint, we may concede that Dr. Patton's position was correct, although this position makes the reasoning of past centuries absolutely final in matters of theology, and cuts off all possibility of growth, progress or development, regarding the most vital question pertaining to human life.

The decision of Professor Swing to sever his relations with his chosen denomination was for him the beginning of a fuller and freer life. He bore no feeling of bitterness toward his former associates, but held them ever in cherished and loving remembrance. He felt, however, that disputes upon questions of doctrine were worse than a waste of time and brain; were, as a rule, regarding questions outside the domain of human knowledge and tended to keep apart millions of the good and pure, who should work in harmony for the salvation of men.

From the broad platform of the Central Church thenceforth doctrinal dogma and the religion of despair were banished, and a faith was taught full of love and gentleness and charity; full of a serene and tranquil belief that the history of man is ever the history of progress; that goodness and virtue will ever rise triumphant in the end.

From his pulpit, too, he reached the widest audience yet accorded to any American preacher. His Sunday's discourse was printed in full the following Monday in one or more of our most widely circulated journals, was copied wholly or in part into other newspapers in every part of the country, and his weekly audience was thus numbered by the hundreds of thousands. The effect of these discourses cannot be over-estimated. The thinking world was ripe for the modification of the earlier and sterner tenets of theology, as it emerged more and more into the light of modern civilization; was hungry

for the teaching of one who should dwell more upon the love and less upon the rigid justice of the Supreme Father of us all; of one who should bring us more into touch with the life of the world in which we live, and less into the discussions of those abstract, dogmatical questions, which have been debated from the dawn of the historic period, and which, from this very fact, are seen to be incapable of solution by the human intellect, or they would have been settled long ago.

All persons who have reached middle life realize the marvelous change which has come over the teachings of our pulpits within the last thirty years, the most notable change since the Reformation; see the broader charity in matters of abstract belief, the wider recognition of the fact that all the great religious faiths of the world are based upon certain common, fundamental principles, but which, by long processes of growth and evolution, are specially adapted to the varied needs of the widely separated and differently constituted peoples. No one in our country has done more to promote this kindly change than Professor Swing. No one

so grandly paved the way for the great Parliament of Religions, which met in our city in 1893—a gathering which would have been impossible a generation ago—and the beneficent consequences of which will be more and more appreciated as the years go by. He was ever ready and eager to recognize the truth, wherever found. Early he had realized fully, as Whittier phrases it, that

"In Vedic verse in dull Koran Are messages of love to man. The prophets of that early day, The slant-eyed sages of Cathay, Read not the riddle all amiss Of higher life evolved from this.

Wherever through the ages rise The altars of self-sacrifice, Where love its arms has opened wide, Or man for man has calmly died, I see the same white wings outspread That hovered o'er the Master's head."

Born in the Presbyterian Church, his work bore the abiding fruits of wisdom, of a gracious and tolerant spirit, and a beautiful and intellectual life in all the Churches. He was a herald of the dawn, and to him all men were brothers, who aided in ways however diverse, in the bringing of the better day.

In the great movement of the religious thought of the nation in the direction of charity and toleration toward those who see not the truth as we see it, the quiet and unassuming preacher of the Central Church, utterly devoid of the graces of oratory, but with a heart full of love and tenderness, with the poet's grasp and the prophet's vision, and with his glowing sentences, which linger in our memories like an exquisite melody, was perhaps the most potent factor.

His sermons abound in paragraphs, epigrammatic in their concentrated wit and wisdom—pure and sparkling gems of thought, from which some loving hand will some time compile an anthology rivaling that of Shakespeare, Franklin or Emerson; phrases musical with the majestic resonance of the psalms; pages where the orator may seek for metaphors and the poet may find his inspiration; and maxims which the eloquence of generations yet unborn will crystallize into the common and permanent speech of people to whom his very name may be unknown. He

held his vast audience, not by the rhetorician's art, but because he had a message to deliver for which the world was waiting and had waited long.

Outside his pulpit work, the most valuable literary efforts of Professor Swing were his papers read before this club, of which he has long been the most loved and honored member. Of late these papers have been largely relative to the leading men of Greece and Rome: Socrates, Cicero, Demosthenes, Pliny and others. From his familiarity with classical literature, these papers have been most graphic and admirable pictures of these antique heroes, bringing them before us from the mists of time with the picturesque vividness of the portraiture of a man of to-day. A volume of these essays was published some years since, and enough others are extant to make two more similar volumes, which it is hoped may soon be published and thus made accessible to his wide audience.

Professor Swing, notwithstanding he was never a man of robust health—being for the greater part of his life a partial invalid—yet led an exceptionally sunny and happy life. He

appreciated and keenly enjoyed the good and beautiful things of this world. Beautiful scenery, flowers, pictures, music, the drama, and, above all, the society of his countless friends, were to him sources of perpetual delight. Dining with a friend on the afternoon of the last Sunday on which he preached, in speaking of his summer's vacation, he said: "The rest, the pure air, the trees, the lake, the birds and flowers were delightful, but men and women are more than all else; all those things were as nothing when compared with the welcoming faces of my congregation and the greetings of the friends of my soul." His sympathetic nature brought him friends. To him came those who were bowed down under the burden of their sorrows, who were weary and heavy laden, for words of encouragement, of cheer and of consolation, which were never wanting. He was an optimist in his views of the future of his countrymen, whom he believed would be the manly and heroic citizens of the ideal commonwealth which was to come in the fulness of time, and which was to be the realization of the dreams of our civilization. Especially

was he hopeful of the growth of the religious idea by the garnering of all that was good in the foregone times and the addition of new truth from our better knowledge of the laws which govern the universe. He quoted the words of Emerson:

"The word by seers or sybils told In groves of oak or fanes of gold, Still floats upon the morning wind, Still whispers to the willing mind. One accent of the Holy Ghost The heedless world has never lost,"

The approach of old age caused him no unhappiness. To one who recently offered him birthday greetings he said: "As age comes upon us we must console ourselves with the words of Browning:

Grow old along with me,
The best is yet to be,
The last of life for which the first was made.
Our times are in His hand,
Who saith a whole I planned.
Youth shows but half. Trust God, see all,
nor be affaid."

Few more impressive scenes have been witnessed in our city than on the occasion of

Professor Swing's funeral. His audience room was filled with those who had long listened to his teachings. With none of the heralding of a public burial, the body of the great preacher was borne to the platform of Central Music Hall, and everywhere surrounded with the flowers which he loved. In the beautiful autumnal afternoon, from all parts of the great city, the saddened multitudes gathered in reverent silence until the streets were filled with the mourning thousands, who, with lowered voices, tremulous with tender feeling, spoke of the graces and virtues of the departed, and of the city's remediless loss. Most impressive, however, was the scene upon the platform within, where sat some seventy clergymen, representing nearly every sect and denomination finding a home in our city. There sat the priest of that church which, among the Christian sects, in point of time is the oldest, in point of numbers in the nation is the greatest, and as a business corporation, the most ably managed in church history. There sat the representative of the extreme liberalism of the modern days, reckless of all the ancient landmarks, side by side

with those who feel that the ancient landmarks are as the laws of the Medes and Persians, which alter not. There were those representing the various Christian sects. divided upon questions of technical construction of some passage of Holy Writ, or some point of church government, and whose points of difference the great divine had by his teachings lovingly sought to obliterate, side by side with the learned Jewish Rabbi, representing the nation from which Christianity itself had sprung, and which Christianity had since ceaselessly persecuted. There sat many of those who, twenty years before, in his time of trial, had criticised his course. and spoken of him words of bitterness, but who, in the intervening time, had in great measure reached the point where he then stood, their views modified largely by his pure and sinless life, his wisdom and loving kindness, his gentleness and abounding charity. All these were met together, bound by the ties of a common sorrow, to testify by their presence, by their reverent bearing, by their hardly subdued grief, their realization of the nation's loss, and of the lovable qualities of him whose death to our vision seemed so sudden and untimely.

To the large circle of his closest friends, great as was their admiration for his intellectual endowment, it was his heart that was greatest. These knew most the breadth of his love and charity, the purity of his thought and life. They saw most of the genial wit and sarcasm, exquisite and unique as that of Charles Lamb, but ever without sting or bitterness. For them a great light has gone out, and the world which has been enriched and made beautiful by this benignant presence can to them be never more the same. How many have applied to him within the last few saddened weeks the lines of Tennyson's In Memoriam:

"Yet in these ears till hearing dies, One set, slow bell will seem to toll The passing of the sweetest soul That ever looked with human eyes.

Whereof the man that with me trod
This planet was a noble type,
Appearing, ere the times were ripe,
That friend of mine who lives in God."

One of the tenderest and most appreciative tributes to the memory of Professor Swing was that of his and our friend, Dr. Gunsaulus, from which, in conclusion, we quote a stanza:

"Our poet preacher in his words of prose
Made life a lyric and its dreams sublime
Far from his musing and his hope there goes
Eternal music for the sons of time."

Franklin H. Head, Abram M. Pence, John H. Barrows,

CHICAGO, October 29, 1894.

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